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Narrative Desire in Ann Petry's *The Street*

Kari J. Winter

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At the origin of Narrative, desire.
—Roland Barthes, *S/Z*

The wind, in the opening scene of Ann Petry's 1946 novel, *The Street*, is a November gale that assaults the residents of Harlem with a barrage of paper, bones, and garbage. It does "everything it [can] to discourage the people walking along the street" (2). It pushes dirt "into their noses, making it difficult to breathe" (2). It thrusts dust into their eyes, lacerates their skin, entangles their feet, grabs their throats, and fingers their necks, bodies, and eyeballs. The wind is so forceful that Lutie Johnson, the novel's protagonist, finds it almost impossible to read the sign for which she has been searching (an advertisement for a vacant apartment). When she blinks back the grime and attempts to focus, the wind twists the sign away from her.

The wind, of course, symbolizes the ubiquitous forces of economic oppression in Harlem that doom African Americans to poverty, degradation, and despair. Taking their cue from the wind, critics such as Bernard Bell have argued that Petry's text is "a conventional novel of economic determinism in which the environment is the dominant force against which the characters must struggle to survive" (107). At first glance, this reading of *The Street* is largely persuasive. Petry shares the philosophical view of naturalism to the extent that she insists that human existence takes root and makes meaning in material conditions. Indeed, in an oft-quoted interview, Petry stated, "In *The Street* my aim is to show how simply

and easily the environment can change the course of a person's life" ("Ann Petry" 49). However, *The Street* also articulates a political critique that is absent from and inimical to the forms of economic determinism found in turn-of-the-century naturalistic novels by authors such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. Rather than viewing social conditions as natural and inevitable, Petry represents the streets of Harlem as the product of a specific history of white supremacism, patriarchy, and class oppression. If we read Petry's emphasis on the importance of environment as an acknowledgment of the centrality of embodied experience in shaping human life, her attention to economic conditions can be seen as a strength rather than a crippling limitation of *The Street*.

After the novel's opening section depicts the role of economics in determining life's course, the narrative urges us to search for truths that reach beyond economics and environment. When Lutie is swept along by the wind (the force of her economic environment), her ability to read informative signs posted along the street is disrupted. To get where she wants to go, she must backtrack and reread. Similarly, Petry's text, when reread, can be seen to exceed her stated intention by proposing complexities surpassing naturalism's philosophical dead-end. The importance of reading beyond the constraints of economic determinism is illustrated in the way that critics who focus on determinism underread two of *The Street's* most original characters, Mrs. Hedges and Junto.

Mrs. Hedges is a black woman of mythic stature who first encounters a white man named Mr. Junto on a cold hopeless night when they are both digging through garbage cans in an alley. By joining forces in creative, pragmatic, and criminal activities, this unlikely pair builds an economic empire in Harlem. In physical appearance, Junto looks something like Dracula's dwarfed assistant and Mrs. Hedges like Frankenstein's creature. Despite appearances, however, Junto's love for Mrs. Hedges is the book's only example of enduring, soulful passion. "A wonderful woman, a wonderful woman!" Junto exclaims with profound admiration every time anyone mentions Mrs. Hedges. Despite the freshness, originality, and gothic dimensions of characters such as Mrs. Hedges and Junto, Mary Helen Washington argues that Petry simply manipulates "characters to serve an ideological function" (299-300).¹ In a similar vein, Bell stereotypes Junto as "the Jewish owner of the major clubs and whorehouses in the black community" (109), although the book never characterizes Junto as Jewish. Indeed, as Marjorie Pryse explains, "the name *Junto* is . . . a direct allusion to the first significant men's club in American colonial history, the name [Benjamin] Franklin gave his secret group of friends" (118). Keith Clark implicitly acknowledges this connection by describing Junto as part of "the powerful white male hegemony" (498), but he oversimplifies Petry's social analysis when he refers to "the omnipotent Junto-police axis" (499). Ascribing "omnipotence" to Junto and the police not only exaggerates their power but diminishes important nuances, complexities, and humor in Petry's vision.

Reading *The Street* as a reductive picture of how the economics of one's environment determine the course of one's life leads Washington to discount the novel's importance. Washington expresses disappointment with Petry's "insistence on environmental determinism as an explanation for her characters'

dead-end lives" (298). She classifies determinism as a central feature of social protest fiction, which, in Washington's view, is preoccupied with men and "inimical to women." She explains: "Petry's fiction engages us, in most unpleasurable ways, in the violence and brutality that result from poverty and discrimination. But I think our discomfort is also caused by the 'circumscribed possibilities' of the text itself, its lack of subtlety and flexibility, its manipulation of characters to serve an ideological function, its refusal to give women a powerful point of view" (300).

Dissatisfied by the "bleakness of [Petry's] work," Washington complains in an interview, "I don't get a lot of pleasure out of a novel that cuts off every possible avenue of triumph. And I think part of the bleakness comes from the fact [that *The Street*] was written very much from the outside. [Petry] does not come from the street" (quoted in Diamant 25). Embedded in Washington's criticism is a statement of her readerly desires: she wants stories that give women a powerful viewpoint and allow them to triumph. Nellie McKay shares Washington's desire for black women writers to provide her with inspiring models of heroic triumph, yet she finds significant value in *The Street*. In McKay's view, "although Lutie loses the fight to transcend the limitations of her environment, she is an interesting heroine" (130). McKay concludes that Petry's "black women . . . do not always win, but they are heroic figures" (139). Because I see the readerly desire for heroism as, in part, a product of the very genre of autobiography that Petry sets out to critique in *The Street*, I would like to reexamine the novel by taking seriously the cautionary opening that highlights the wind in Lutie Johnson's eyes, her difficulty in reading, and the deceptive nature of the sign itself. Following Roland Barthes's insight that rereading "alone saves the text from repetition (those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere)" (quoted in Felman 41), I will reread *The Street* focusing on two questions: "What do characters in this novel want? What narrative desires does Petry arouse, reproduce, or frustrate for her readers?" In part, I will suggest that if, as Barthes observes, desire is "[a]t the origin of Narrative" (*S/Z* 88), *The Street* taps into a desire more powerful than the readerly wish for a happy ending (which early feminism often figured as a triumphant woman in the *Bildungsroman* tradition). In short, *The Street* unveils a primary, painful longing for the mother in a patriarchal environment that deprives people, especially black women, of the ability to have and to become mothers sufficiently empowered to nourish their offspring.

As Washington noted, Petry was not describing her own experience in *The Street*. Lutie Johnson is a protagonist significantly different from Petry, although both author and character are black and female. Petry was raised in a comfortable home in a predominantly white New England town. Her parents were well-educated professionals. After earning a degree in pharmacy, Petry worked as a pharmacist in her family's drugstore for seven years. In 1938, at the age of twenty-nine, she married and moved to New York to become a writer. She worked as a journalist, wrote short stories, and took creative writing courses at Columbia University. *The Street*, her first novel, was published in 1946. It won high praise from influential critics such as Arna Bontemps and Alain Locke and sold over a million copies.

In contrast, Lutie Johnson struggles in *The Street* to rise from poverty to middle-class comfort, while preserving a solitary individual virtue that isolates her from most people in Harlem. Lutie's mother is dead, and her father is an alcoholic, bootlegging womanizer. After discovering her husband with another woman, Lutie takes her son Bub in hand and ventures into what Petry explicitly figures as the master narrative of American autobiography. "You and Ben Franklin," Lutie grins to herself, walking down the street with her arms full of brown crusty bread rolls just as Franklin walked down a Philadelphia street in his autobiography (63). Inspired by Franklin's growth from a poor country bumpkin to a wealthy founder of America, Lutie decides to follow in his footsteps. She declares to herself, "I'm young and strong, there isn't anything I can't do" (63). Believing that the American Dream is an attainable plot for her, she is confident that she will triumph over racism, sexism, and poverty through hard work, virtue, and frugality.² This scene demonstrates that rather than writing autobiographically, Petry was consciously developing a multifaceted critique of dominant myths in American autobiography. As Marjorie Pryse notes, "The precise nature of the social criticism Petry offers in *The Street* relies on the reader's recognition of Lutie's references to Franklin and, even more, on our ability to place these references within the context of American idealism" (117).

Attempting to explain why Lutie is unable to succeed, Pryse argues that Lutie "fails to recognize the stigma of her race and sex and her consequent disqualifications for achieving her particular version of the American Dream." Similarly, McKay suggests that "Lutie may well have had greater success in achieving her goals had she been less innocent of the politics of race, class, and gender" (135). I would contend that daily life makes Lutie inescapably aware of the power of racism, sexism, and poverty. Although Petry represents Lutie as naively optimistic, the novel suggests that hope for a better future is essential to Lutie's survival. Innocence about politics is not the primary barrier to Lutie's goals; rather, innocence about her goals is a primary barrier to the new consciousness that might enable Lutie to wrench her life out of predetermined plots. In other words, *The Street* not only exposes the power of race, class, and gender oppression; it also, profoundly, questions the value of the patriarchal, materialistic, and individualistic "American Dream" that Lutie unswervingly pursues.

In *What Does a Woman Want?* Shoshana Felman asserts that "*none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography. . . .* Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become* a story" (14). Felman argues that in order to author a new autobiographical plot — to make our own stories self-present to us — we must name and call into being our own desire. Writing within and against a society dominated by father figures and ideologically mandated to manufacture desire for the Father, Ann Petry suggests that those desires that are ideologically unaddressed, unsatiated, or alienated, *especially hunger for the mother*, are the (shifting, dangerous, but potent) sites from which new subjectivities may be created.

Lutie's existential dilemma is this: she is sitting as it were in a dream overlooking the streets of America. No matter where she looks she can see noth-

ing she wants without hesitation or qualification. On the one side looms a vast hopelessness that feels, paradoxically, both empty and claustrophobic. She thinks that "she couldn't possibly go on living here with nothing to look forward to. As she sat there, it seemed to her that time stretched away in front of her so far that it couldn't be measured; it couldn't be encompassed or even visualized if it meant living in this place for years and years" (82). Then she asks herself, "What else [is] there?" The novel replies: on the other side of despair is a hunger so large and ravenous that it is virtually unnameable. Petry's figure of hunger incarnate is Jones, the supervisor of the apartment building that Lutie enters in the beginning of the novel. Filled with "a hunger so urgent that [Lutie] was instantly afraid of him and afraid to show her fear," Jones represents a desire that goes "up and up into darkness. . . . [T]he hot, choking awfulness of his desire for her pinioned her so that she couldn't move. It was an aching yearning that filled the apartment, pushed against the walls, plucked at her arms" (15). Jones's desire horrifies Lutie to the extent that when she leaves the apartment building, she flings "herself into the wind, welcoming its attack" (26).

It is hardly surprising that Lutie would prefer the wind of oppression to the hunger of Jones. Jones is a terrifying character. Born into economic hardship and forced to spend his life underground in cellars, furnace-rooms, and dingy apartments, Jones has been read as a revision of Richard Wright's *Bigger Thomas*³ and could be read as a twisted prototype of Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Throughout the novel, Jones kicks, punches, and starves his dog, treats his nearly invisible live-in woman like a dog, and spins dog-like sexual fantasies about Lutie. His obsessions lead him to attempt to rape Lutie. Yet, hideous as he is, Jones the Super is propelled by a hunger that, Petry suggests, could repel the winds of social determinism. Let me be clear. Jones is not a Romantic hero or antihero. He is no rebel, no militant, no deliberate subversive. He reproduces patriarchy by viewing women as consumable objects, and he discusses racism only when so doing enables him to avoid taking responsibility for his own violence, particularly his attempt to rape Lutie. Unlike Ellison's invisible man, Jones is not interested in political struggle and intellectual analysis. Whereas the invisible man learns how "painful and empty" it feels "to be free of illusion" — to have suffered what Ellison images as castration (*Invisible Man* 569) — Jones has never held the invisible man's illusions: faith in the rebel, the Brotherhood, and the phallus. What Jones hungers for is the mother. Like a starving infant, he has an uncontrollable urge to consume female flesh. Whereas a Romantic hero suffers from overweening pride, Jones suffers from unweanable hunger. "Half-mad with a frenzied kind of hunger that [drives] the women away from him" (86), Jones consumes woman after woman. "It didn't worry him that they left him after a few days because he could always find others to take their places." No matter how many women he consumes, his hunger remains insatiable. He grows "gaunter and lonelier as the years [creep] past him." Age makes it difficult to find women who will put up with his "slobberin' over" them (87). When he sees Lutie Johnson, he wants her "worse than he had ever wanted anything in his life."

From Frederick Douglass to Richard Wright, hunger has been a central motif in African-American literature. Petry adds feminist insight to the tradi-

tion by showing how Jones's hunger threatens the lives and well-being of other members of the community, particularly women. At the same time, Petry represents hunger-driven Jones as an artist manqué whose creations are provisions of a world freed from the strictures of color and caste. Petry's vision here is bleak; indeed, it is almost sinister. The force that runs counter to the wind of economic determinism is a hunger so deep that it appears mad or, as Lutie puts it, "unusual, extraordinary, abnormal" (25). Although Jones's hunger, like the rage of Bigger Thomas and countless other figures in African-American literature, springs from the deprivation of his environment and enslaves him in some ways to predatory instincts, it is so immense that it cannot ultimately be contained by the oppressive forces that cause it. Sexual and other primal desires always threaten ideological control because of their instability, irrationality, and potency — a point Petry, perhaps unconsciously, drives home through her gothic representations of Jones's hunger haunting the street.

Within minutes of their first encounter, Lutie feels Jones's eyes "eating her up" (25). Later she has a nightmare in which Jones appears as

something less than human. . . . He and the dog had become one. He was still tall, gaunt, silent. The same man, but with the dog's wolfish mouth and the dog's teeth — white, sharp, pointed, in the redness of his mouth. His throat worked like the dog's throat. He made a whining noise deep inside it. He panted and strained to get free and run through the block, but the building was chained to his shoulders like an enormous doll's house made of brick. . . . [He had] a painful, slow, horrible crawl of a walk. . . . He fawned on people in the street, dragged himself close to them, stood in front of them, pointing to the building and to the chains. "Unloose me! Unloose me!" he begged.

(191-2)

At first glance, this passage appears to be a classic instance of naturalistic imagery; Jones is dehumanized by his environment. However, Jones exceeds images of bestiality to assume a mythic stature similar to that of an enslaved Hercules carrying a building in Harlem in place of the world on his back. Lutie's nightmare image of Jones fawning on people and begging them to "unloose" him, when read in conjunction with images of Jones fawning on women, suggests that Jones's insatiable sexual hunger unconsciously reveals his desire for the community to emancipate itself and free him.

Although Lutie is terrified of being eaten, raped, or killed by Jones, at a more profound level she is afraid of *becoming* Jones. Her antipathy is partly a defense to block recognition of their kinship in hunger. In her nightmare, she screams and screams while she witnesses thousands and millions of people on the street turning into rats. They swarm around her, crying, "Unloose me! Unloose me!" (193). If the image of people as rats derives from naturalism, the cry for freedom connects Petry's text to the slave narrative tradition, a tradition that endorses not the narrative trajectory of economic determinism but rather the trajectory of collective action leading to social transformation. Rather than following the triumphant path of individual growth that characterizes novels

and autobiographies in the *Bildungsroman* genre, Lutie moves away from confidence in her individual particularity toward recognition of herself as part of a collective. Near the end of the novel, Lutie reflects on “the animals at the Zoo. . . . They were weaving back and forth, growling, roaring, raging at the bars that kept them from the meat, until the entire building was filled with the sound, until the people watching drew back from the cages, feeling insecure, frightened at the sight and the sound of such uncontrolled savagery. She was becoming something like that” (325). Although this self-image is not a happy one, it is empowering in the sense that Lutie has moved from seeing herself as a frightened individual watching the animals toward seeing herself as a raging animal who has the ability to frighten and to loosen the control of the (white) people who created and maintain the “zoo” — that is, the dehumanizing conditions of Harlem.

An earlier incident in the novel connects the politics of hunger and food to the problematics of reading. Walking along Lenox Avenue on a spring day, “thinking that the sun transformed everything it shone on,” Lutie is halted by a crowd gathered around the emaciated corpse of a black man stabbed to death by a white man in a bakery. Stricken by the sight of the murdered man’s shoes, Lutie reflects, “for weeks he must have walked practically barefoot on the pavement” (196). The man’s shoes signify a terrifying hunger. Soon Lutie observes a sister approach the dead body. The sister passively accepts her brother’s death with the comment, “I always thought it’d happen” (197). To Lutie this girl symbolizes the living dead, the person she herself could become if she were to lose hope and silence her rage. Angered by the resignation she reads everywhere around her, Lutie vows never to accept the predetermined fate of racism and poverty.

The day after the murder Lutie learns a lesson about (mis)reading. The newspaper

said that a “burly Negro” had failed in his effort to hold up a bakery shop, for the proprietor had surprised him by resisting and stabbed him with a bread knife. She held the paper in her hand for a long time, trying to follow the reasoning by which that thin ragged boy had become in the eyes of a reporter a “burly Negro.” And she decided that it all depended on where you sat how these things looked. If you looked at them from inside the framework of a fat weekly salary, and you thought of colored people as naturally criminal, then you didn’t really see what any Negro looked like. You couldn’t, because the Negro was never an individual. He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke.

(198-9)

Lutie connects the reporter’s (mis)reading of the murder to wealthy white people’s (mis)readings of her. The Chandlers, who had employed her as a maid, “looked at her and didn’t see her, but saw instead a wench with no morals who would be easy to come by” (199).

This passage places us at the heart of Lutie’s predicament. On the one hand, Lutie is determined to rebel against the Chandlers’ reading of her and to

resist the resignation of the living dead. On the other hand, she is terrified of the hunger that fuels rebellion and resistance. While heroines in naturalistic novels such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) are driven by sexual instincts they cannot in any sense control, Lutie is highly conscious of the (racialized) politics of sexuality, and she makes choices about sexuality that she judges to be in her best interest. She believes that desire — especially sexual desire — would transform her into the “wench with no morals” that the Chandlers already believe her to be. Embracing the ruling-class definition of virtuous femininity, she represses every inkling of her sexuality. (I would argue that the Freudian concept of “repression” implies a different lack of control than the naturalistic notion of uncontrollable instinctual drive.) Petry repeatedly calls attention to Lutie's chastity. Since Lutie cannot afford a divorce, she cannot get married, and since she cannot get married, she will permit neither sexual desire nor activity in her life. It is no accident that Lutie kills the man (Boots, a black man who stands in for the white Junto, “The Man”) who misreads her availability and attempts to violate her.

Determined to overcome both the wind of economic determinism and the hunger of the oppressed, Lutie is trapped in no-man's land. She devotes her energy to a vague notion of “fighting back” and attaining a better life. She defines “better” as a way to bring up her son “so that he would be a fine, strong man” (72), which she believes depends on earning enough money to live on a better street in an apartment with a better kitchen. The problem is that her goals are both mutually dependent and mutually exclusive. Lutie's preoccupation with earning money leads her to neglect and mistreat her son. When Lutie tries to think through her predicament, she concludes, “She didn't know what happened next, but they'd never catch her in their dirty trap. She'd fight her way out. She and Bub would fight their way out together” (74).

These thoughts are circular. Where is Lutie to go if she cannot envision a place where she wants to be? What would happen if she attained the “miracle of a kitchen” that she fantasizes about? The kitchen she dreams of has a white porcelain sink. “The faucets looked like silver. The linoleum floor of the kitchen was a crisp black-and-white pattern that pointed up the sparkle of the room. Casement windows. Red geraniums in yellow pots” (28). A clean, orderly kitchen dominated by white and tidily containing tokens of black, red, and yellow — this is the kitchen of a house on the most beautiful street Lutie has ever seen. Just such a kitchen, Lutie reflects, “was what had wrecked her and Jim” because “[t]he sink had belonged to someone else — she'd been washing someone else's dishes when she should have been home with Jim and Bub” (30).

The owners of the kitchen are the Chandlers, wealthy members of New England's ruling class who mistreat Lutie in many ways. The most damning evidence of their moral, emotional, and intellectual bankruptcy comes on Christmas Day, when one of the Chandler brothers commits suicide. The family shows no grief at his demise; they are concerned only to cover up the scandal of a suicide. The Chandlers, then, offer Lutie no goal worth striving for. While Lutie looks at the street in Harlem and thinks, “No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked

the humanity out of people — slowly, surely, inevitably” (229), the novel as a whole suggests that every street in America has the capacity to suck the humanity out of people. Lutie is certainly trapped by her race, gender, and class, and a change in environment is crucial to her survival, but changing her environment would not, by itself, enable her to escape oppression. In one possible scenario, if Lutie were able to move from serving the Chandlers in the Chandler kitchen to serving her husband and son in the Johnson kitchen, she would still be a woman *in service*. More seriously, the white kitchen of Lutie’s dreams appears accessible only to those people who share the Chandlers’ class values. The transformation of Lutie’s life hinges on the articulation of a new desire.

In many of Petry’s images and metaphors, Lutie views her life as a text, and she does her best to control not only what this text says but also how it is read. One of Lutie’s persistent problems, however, is that she is not a wise reader. In addition to misreading the text of her own life, including her needs and desires, she misreads the significant people around her. For example, she sees Jones precisely as the newspaper reporter sees the murdered man: as “a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight” (199). Lutie reads Jones and his partner Min in terms parallel to those she applied to the murdered brother and his apathetic sister. Lutie concludes, “the street had pushed [Jones] into basements away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession; and still other streets had turned Min, the woman who lived with him, into a drab drudge — so spineless and so limp she was like a soggy dishrag. None of those things would happen to her, Lutie decided, because she would fight back and never stop fighting back” (57). In this passage, Lutie underreads Min more seriously than she misreads Jones. Although she appears to be a spineless drudge, Min becomes a working-class hero in Petry’s *Bildungsroman* subplot. Extending her critique of the *Bildungsroman* narrative trajectory of Franklin-esque autobiography, Petry parodies the frank physicality of Franklin’s prose in her telling of Min’s story. Min’s desires center on false teeth, protection from Jones, and a safer home. Unlike Lutie, Min grows to the point that she can name and attain her desires. In a moment of Afrocentric “magical realism” completely at odds with naturalism’s philosophical denial of a spiritual dimension, Petry represents Min as drawing power spiritually and psychologically from her encounters with a root doctor called the Prophet. By encouraging Min to tell her story, listening attentively, and prescribing Hoodoo charms, the Prophet functions effectively as “the subject presumed to know” of psychoanalysis at the same time that he provides concrete physical “protections.” Having found her voice and a cure she believes in, Min is empowered to attain her goals. Thus, in the midst of all the bleakness, the “uncontrolled savagery” of Harlem, Petry shows her readers an unexpected site of hope.

Nonetheless, the reader might feel that Min’s desires are so meager that their fulfillment will have little social impact. In the behavior of Jones the Super, Petry gives us a glimpse (as through a glass, darkly) of ways that hunger might motivate new, more empowering narratives. Jones’s first strategy for wooing Lutie is a meditation on color. Lutie asks him to paint her apartment white. Wanting to give her something more special than uniform white, Jones “put green in the living room, yellow in the kitchen, deep rose color in the bed-

room, and dark blue in the bathroom. When it was finished, he was very proud of it, for it was the best paint job he'd ever done" (100). Jones risks his position as building supervisor by performing this special paint job, but Lutie is angered by his dismissal of her expressed desire for whiteness and his violation of her understanding of color. Nonetheless, one could say that Jones has envisioned a use of color that defies the tidy, hierarchical ordering of color that has trapped Lutie in white people's kitchens.⁴

Jones's second strategy is to cultivate friendship with her son, Bub. In addition to giving Bub attention, advice, and money, Jones helps Bub create and decorate a shoeshine box. When Lutie sees the box, she slaps her son several times "sharply across the face" (66) and speaks in a voice "thick with rage. 'I'm working to look after you and you out here in the street shining shoes just like the rest of these little niggers'" (67). This incident painfully illuminates Lutie's discomfort with and detachment from the other residents of Harlem. Rather than fostering her son's sense of community, she violently disrupts Bub's pleasure in his own industry and creativity, whereas Jones has encouraged in Bub a concept of creative labor. Lutie's anger springs from her understanding that racism traps many black boys and men in jobs as shoe-shiners and that Bub's creativity could be used by white society to destroy him. In fact, Lutie's own creative efforts at singing set the stage for her destruction in the racist-sexist context of Harlem. Nonetheless, Jones's efforts to cultivate Bub's creativity reinforce the book's motif of Jones as a would-be artist with no constructive outlet.

After Jones's courtship strategies fail and Mrs. Hedges prevents him from raping Lutie, Jones authors a plot worthy of a master storyteller. The narrative challenge for Petry is this: how can she have Jones entice Bub to engage in criminal activities that threaten society without compromising the young boy's innocence in the reader's mind? The plot that Jones, as a stand-in for Petry, invents is one that writers are particularly sensitive to: messing with the mail. Fostering Bub's love of detective fiction, Jones asks the young boy to help the police find a criminal who is committing mail fraud. Bub's assignment is to wander through the neighborhood clandestinely stealing mail out of people's boxes. In this, his final, scheme, Jones is successful. He has imagined and implemented a plot that controls the behavior of the police as well as of Bub and Lutie. Bub gets caught and jailed. Trying to rescue her son, Lutie commits murder in a desperate rage and reaches the conclusion that Bub would be better off without her. She abandons him. In this tragic conclusion, Petry impresses upon readers the pain of the mother's absence, an absence that has in fact haunted the entire novel.

The character who most consistently displays a raw, uncontrollable longing for the mother is, of course, Jones. If in the final analysis Jones's potentially subversive desires are captured and reharnessed by the wind (the force of oppression), it is perhaps because Jones is unable or unwilling to couple his hunger with the truth of self-analysis. Nonetheless, *The Street* suggests that hunger is the force that compels human beings to combat economic determinism. Lutie cannot get what she wants, primarily because she is thoroughly oppressed by American racism, sexism, and classism, but also because she can-

not read and claim ownership of her own hunger. She focuses her struggle exclusively on accumulating enough money to escape “the street,” which is precisely where the combined forces of economic, racial, and sexual oppression keep her imprisoned. Alienated from sexuality and disenfranchised as a mother, she is trapped in the compulsive repetition of master narratives and forced to read the same story everywhere. If she could learn to name and own her deepest hungers — for the erased mother, for self-possession, for the blurring of individual boundaries that is expressed variously as sex, motherhood, and/or community — Lutie might develop a sense of self and community that would mitigate (somewhat) the dominance of economics over her life. She might, for example, be able to sing for the love of the music, for the triumph of intermingling her voice with other voices in Harlem’s polyphony, rather than selling her voice solely for money and repressing her pleasure in it.

Near the end of the novel Lutie grows to understand and identify with a multicultural group of poor women huddled in a lawyer’s office. Petry explains, “[Lutie] knew now why they sat like that. Because we’re like animals trying to pull all the soft, quivering tissue deep inside of us away from the danger that lurks in a room like this” (409). Instead of dismissing this animal imagery as the standard fare of naturalism, we can reread Petry’s attentiveness to women’s “soft, quivering tissue” as a significant form of writing the maternal body into a political analysis of the “danger that lurks” in the ideological compartments of America. Lutie’s flesh — her animalistic, vulnerable flesh — is threatened by social disease, but that same motherly flesh is the source of hope for the re-creation of humanity.

The novel closes as Lutie moves her finger over the dusty glass of a train window and wonders, “What possible good has it done to teach people like me to write?” The answer lies not in Lutie’s world but in Petry’s world. Writing *The Street* earned Petry fame and fortune — a Ben Franklin success after all, with this supplement: Petry named the problems in Franklinesque myth. Like Ralph Ellison, Petry understands the power of patriarchy and white supremacy. Both Lutie Johnson and the invisible man recognize their capacity to kill “The Man.” Both also grow to understand the futility of the Oedipal narrative, a compulsively repeated struggle in which the rebellious offspring kills the father only to end up taking his place. Lutie and the invisible man suffer from the existential angst of having to make choices when they are alienated from all the options that they can read in life. Neither Lutie nor the invisible man knows what s/he wants, but both know that the time has come to move beyond Oedipus. Although father figures abound in *The Street*, our narrative gaze must ultimately seek out the mothers (some of whom, like the Prophet, are male). As Pryse observes, the only alternative to oppression suggested by the novel is motherhood, “a motherhood not of biology but of human connection” (129). Unable to be mothered or to give birth to her own story, Lutie leaves her son motherless. In the novel’s desperate conclusion, Ann Petry forces the reader to contemplate a world in which large classes of people *cannot* triumph by the rules of Benjamin Franklin’s individualistic self-construction. The master narrative does not work on the streets of everyday life. Inviting new imaginings of narrative desire, Petry whets our hunger and our rage.

Notes

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the American Studies Association annual meeting in Nashville in October 1994. I am grateful to the session's other participants, Ann Allen Shockley, Arlene Clift-Pellow, Laura Quinn, and John Sekora, for their astute comments. John Sekora's sudden death on February 2, 1997 was a blow to us all and a significant loss to the field of African-American studies. This paper is dedicated to his memory.

1. In an insightful reading, Pryse describes Mrs. Hedges as a virtually omniscient, godlike genius who nonetheless is fallible and human.
2. For a different but illuminating reading of Lutie's pursuit of the American Dream, see Clark.
3. See Pryse 130n. 3.
4. Perhaps Ellison was inspired by Petry's meditation on paint colors to write the invisible man's famous lessons in white paint.

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